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## The perception of parents on the issue of early intervention in child development

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### Abstract

Our study is an approach to probing the perception of parents on the complex issues arising from early development and early childhood education in Romania. A group of 100 parents of children with disabilities from Bucharest was interviewed. We used a questionnaire adapted from The Early Parenting Self-Efficacy Scale Inventory (EIPSES). Most parents perceive themselves as taking an active role in the education of their child; they collaborate and offer solutions to problems raised by the SEE (Specialist in Early Education). However the SEE is seen as having a decisive role in the child's educational progress.

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**Keywords:** early intervention, parental self-perception, specialist in early education;

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### 1. Introduction

The transition from one level of education to another often creates emotional instability in children but also in the family system, especially at the start of primary school. Full involvement of parents in supporting their children's adaptation to a formal education, such as the school structure, is a guarantee of overcoming separation anxiety experienced by many children, the establishment of comfortable relationships with teachers and other students and, of course, a guarantee of proper academic acquisitions. In the last few years there have been many studies on positive coping strategies for parents, involving them in overcoming socio-emotional, behavioral or academic problems that arise when children start school (Belsky & Kinnon, 1994, Coleman & Karraker, 1997). According to these studies, when parents

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know their children's characteristics and have faith in their own skills as parents, they develop creative strategies so the children are more likely to successfully overcome this stage.

Based on the theory of parenting self-efficacy (Ardelt & Eccles, 2001) a group of specialists from the Parenting Research Centre, RMIT University, Australia (Giallo, Kienhuis, Treyvaud, Matthews, 2008) have developed a psychometric assessment tool of parental self-efficacy when children's transition to school takes place: The Parent self-efficacy in Managing the Transition to School Scale (PSMTSS). The scale was applied on a large group of Australian mothers whose children were preparing for school entry, mothers who were part of a research program in which parents were given practical information and strategies to help them adapt their behaviour so that their children could cope with the first year of school.

Parents of children with disabilities live more intensely the experience of school commencement, because insufficient information or inconsistent support from state institutions make them feel helpless. Most of these parents want mainstreaming school integration and support for them as parents but also as first educators (Gliga & Popa, 2010).

Studies show that some countries are developing early intervention plans for social services for families with children with disabilities in order to increase the chances that these children are educationally and socially integrated. The role of the family in promoting early social and emotional attitudes and appropriate behavior is crucial for stimulating the potential of children with disabilities (Baily & Bruder, 2005). In this sense, an assessment tool of early intervention parental self-efficacy, EIPSES, was developed, which refers to the individual's own perception on a performed task, in this case the ability to be effective in parenting skills and tasks (Guimond, Wilcox, Lamorey, 2008).

Some researches (Guimond et al., 2008; Sanders, Maravska, 2005) took into account parental beliefs on the effectiveness of their protective and educational interventions in relation with the role of the environment on child's development.

In Romania, authorities included in the 2009-2012 government objectives that the Ministry of Education, Research, Youth and Sports (MERYS) should be responsible for coordinating the processes involved in early education, in order to improve interventions, budget use and coordination of services offered by this ministry with those provided by the Ministry of Health and Ministry of Labour, Family and Social Services.

Supporting this idea, the new curriculum for early education addresses educational activities undertaken in nurseries as well as the compatibility between early learning and primary school education.

In order to increase educational opportunities and social-professional integration of children with disabilities in the kindergartens, there should be parent resource centers that provide counselling and assistance to parents who have children with special needs. It is also necessary to expand and support home education for children with disabilities.

This is one of the first studies in Romania that evaluates parents' opinion with regard to their involvement in their children's early education. Because early intervention in Romania is still at the beginning, we wanted to see what is the self-perception of parent involvement in the education of children with disabilities and how they perceive the role of the SEE. At the same time we wanted to know how well informed they are about SEE activity and early development strategy and how much they get involved in teaming up with SEE. The role of society and public services in the perception of parents of children with disabilities was another research direction in our study.

## 2. Method

### 2.1. Sample presentation

The sample to which we applied the adapted questionnaire from EIPSES consists of 100 parents of disabled children from Bucharest (Average = 9.5 years). 44 of their children were from special schools and 56 from normal schools. Most parents (79%) come from biparental families, 62% were middle school graduates and only 19% had higher education. The disabilities of children whose parents participated in this study are presented in Table 1.

Table 1: Types of disabilities of children whose parents participated in the study

	Number
Mental disability	51
Sensorial disability	16
Autism	8
Hyperkinesy	10
Physical disability	5
Behavioural disorders	7
Chromosomal syndromes	3

### 2.2. Procedure

Parents, whose children learn in two normal schools and two special schools in Bucharest were invited to participate in this study through a letter. Of the 258 parents who replied, 100 participated in face-to-face interviews conducted by one of the researchers (TM). All these parents answered entirely to the questionnaire composed of 20 questions.

### 2.3. Questionnaire presentation

The questionnaire consists of 20 questions out of which 19 are semi-open and only one question is open. It follows the EIPSES scale structure. The way in which the question is answered is recorded in the questionnaire as it follows: Yes, No and sometimes Not always (questions 11 and 12). To get detailed responses, additional indications to the questionnaire are added: (e.g. “Solutions / I think you should ...”- if the answer is Yes, to question 1 or 8; “Another opinion “- if the answer is No to question 3, etc.). The only open question is 6, on a parent’s failure to have a good self-image of his child. Agreement or disagreement should be detailed by respondents.

## 3. Results

The current study aims to present partial results obtained by applying statistical processing of the questionnaire, namely only the closed questions (19 questions from the semi-open group). We have analyzed six directions of the study: (1) parent helps his/her child, (2) parent works with SEE, (3) SEE

supports the children, (4) the role of genetic factors, environment in EI(early intervention), (5) lack of services, (6) parent opinion about oneself.

81.4% of parents believe that they help their child when he/she has problems. Over 60% of parents believe that they help their child when he/she learns and evolves faster, although when this happens, parents (24.3%) don't always believe they can manage this situation.

If 78.6% of parents believe that they form a good team with SEE, a smaller percentage (60% and 61.4% respectively) can offer suggestions, information to the specialist. The parent seems to decline his/her jurisdiction when it comes to suggestions and information. Perhaps he/she is considered not well equipped to perform a job that he/she does not know very well and he/she does not practice. The parents' opinion about their own competence is a good one when the questions relate to society understanding their problems. Only 54.3% of parents believe they could help more if society would be more sympathetic. 52.9% believe that the support granted by the SEE has an impact on the child. In this case the percentage is close to 50%, indicating that the parent believes in his/her own influence on early intervention for his/her child.

Even though only 55.7% believe that when it comes to regress the cause needs to be sought in the work of the SEE, this indicates that parents connect success and progress with themselves and loss or decline with the SEE. But the parents notice their child's progress (81.4%) and many parents (77.1%) believe that a better progress is due to the SEE work. Contradictory answers to questions, different in form but similar in terms of content, indicate that parents of disabled children in Romania are still unfamiliar with the concepts and specialists in the field of early education and intervention. Confusion concerning the terms and obligations they have, partnerships between parent and the SEE are leading to contradictory answers and the impossibility of forming an opinion on the attitudes of parents regarding early intervention.

Parents participating in this study do not believe / do not always believe that genetic factors, or society and / or the SEE have a greater influence than they have on their own child's education. 61.4% believe that heredity has no higher influence than education in terms of development and evolution of the children with disabilities. 80% of parents believe they are coping well with daily problems, 75.7% consider that they do many things when their child is sick. 58.6% of respondents express confidence that they are even good enough to meet the demands for intervention and education of a child with disabilities and 84.3% believe they have made progress to become even better parents. Note that parents have a good opinion when it comes to educating their own child, while recognizing the need and role of the SEE, responsible for regression or progress of children with disabilities.

#### 4. Discussion

The first conclusions we can draw from the analysis of these partial results are related to the positive attitude that parents of disabled children have towards their involvement in their children's early education. Parents feel involved but are not ready to help their children progress. Progress can be achieved only with the SEE. Parents can't provide solutions or information when children with disabilities face development and educational problems. Parents believe that the SEE is a person trained to produce major changes in education and at the same time is responsible for the child's regress. What is seen in this first study on parental self-efficacy in early intervention is that parents still don't know how to team up with specialists in early education. Parents and professionals seem to be on parallel roads, working with children with disabilities, seeing the effectiveness of each factor involved. But parents believe that they form a good team with these specialists. The inaccuracies we found between parental responses during interviews are due to the ignorance of the possibilities that early education and national

strategy can offer. Lack of specialized social services that have the role of informing parents of their possibilities to benefit from early intervention makes them overestimate their own possibilities, or those of specialists in early education. Their own possibilities refer to parents skills. However their expectations are geared towards the SEE. Parents interviewed in this study are considered competent enough and have higher expectations from early education specialists. Knowledge of a broader range of useful services in early education, awareness of the role that he/she and specialists in early education should play, teaming up with the SEE are all directions of action to increase the efficiency of this type of intervention and development of cognitive, psychomotor, behavioral progress of children with disabilities (Popa, 2009).

Future studies will need to demonstrate the importance of the strategy developed by MERYS, the importance of its knowledge and its putting into practice for parents of children with disabilities. Effective team building can be achieved only through mutual understanding, through direct contact, through formal and non-formal activities. We hope that in the future research we can demonstrate that a better information on the national strategy in early education and intervention, a wider range of educational and social services, a good knowledge of the roles that parents and professionals in early education have to play, will impact on the opinions of parents of children with disabilities for early intervention and the role they have in teaming up with the SEE. The goal is to integrate children with disabilities to achieve educational, social, societal support through common effort: parent-specialist in early education, for their benefit and the benefit of society as a whole.

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